FEATURES

Bedbugs in the Duvet

An infestation on the Upper East Side.

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(Photo: From left, William Abranowicz/Art + Commerce; Adam Nadel/Scanning Electron Microscope/Tescan USA with Jack Mershon)

Margaret is an attractive woman, mid-thirtyish, possessed of all the happier contradictions of 21st-century noblesse. She's elegant yet unpretentious; driven but in a laid-back sort of way. You would recognize her surname. Her husband, she says, laughing, "is one of those vilified bankers." She is a career woman herself, expert in the field of marketing with a wealth of international experience, proficient in several languages, speaking mainly French to her young son. Her family's apartment is in the East Eighties. It is large, immaculate, and well appointed. Margaret, barefoot, wiggles her toes as she sits beneath a Richard Serra. Works by other notable modernists hang elsewhere.

Margaret and her family moved here from Tribeca last fall. The place was just what they wanted—newly renovated and much closer to their 4-year-old son's school. But within a few weeks, Margaret's son (let's call him James) woke up with welts on his chest. Margaret wasn't alarmed; she figured it was a rash or virus, the kind of thing kids get every day. But when the welts lingered, then more showed up—on James's back and arms and legs—Margaret took him to the pediatrician. The doctor initially regarded the marks as an atypical form of chicken pox. In the following weeks, however, after James's welts became infected and began appearing in still more

places, Margaret took him to a pediatric dermatologist. That doctor diagnosed the problem as mosquito bites, and recommended the family "bomb" the apartment. Not long after, Margaret and her husband began noticing that they, too, had bites. That's when Margaret inspected her son's bed. "I saw these minuscule black creatures," she says. "I'm squeamish, but I reached out and squashed one. It was filled with my son's blood. And they were all over. I turned the headboard around and saw all the eggs. At which point I screamed." Margaret did some Internet research, then called an entomologist. When the bug expert conveyed his conclusion to Margaret, she was horrified, disgusted, and not a little concerned for her family. And although she is no snob, Margaret couldn't repress an uncomfortable thought: that people who live in multimillion-dollar apartments in the tonier precincts of the Upper East Side are just not supposed to have bedbugs.

The recent citywide resurgence of bedbugs has been well documented. In 2004, the Health Department tallied 537 complaints and 82 actual violations. Last year, those numbers ballooned to 10,985 complaints and 4,084 violations (given that the problem is thought to be significantly underreported, the notion that there aren't far more cases is daylight madness). What is less well known is that, contrary to the popular stereotype, bedbugs aren't found only in lower-income neighborhoods. Margaret, in fact, is part of a mostly silent community of wealthy Upper East Siders suffering from the scourge. Like all bedbug victims, she and her neighbors are appalled and revolted. At the same time, they face issues that are, well, uniquely their own. Not that anyone ever brags about having bedbugs, but because of the creatures' low-rent reputation, well-to-do bedbug sufferers tend to be especially reluctant to let on that they have a problem (hence Margaret's unwillingness to reveal her real name; she doesn't want to become known, in her phrase, as "Queen of the Bedbugs"). That wealthy bedbug victims tend to own their homes—expensive homes that might end up far less expensive were a bedbug infestation to become public knowledge—also promotes heightened discretion. Exterminators who service the neighborhood trawl around in unmarked vans and are sworn not to divulge their clients' identities. Co-op boards and building superintendents engage in strict denials. High-priced specialists are enlisted to quietly rid Dior couture gowns, Porthault linens, and Aubusson silk rugs of their insect invaders. For those who appreciate irony, and perhaps a touch of Schadenfreude, there is this: Long-held ideas about bedbugs and poverty aside, wealthy people may in some ways be *more* prone to infestation. Bedbugs are equal-opportunity pests.

As Margaret tells her tale of woe, James is clambering around the apartment, making lots of kid-type noise. He has a friend from upstairs to help. The two have taken to banging a tray in the kitchen, and it sounds like they're destroying the place, as a nanny looks on helplessly.

Identifying the problem was just the start of Margaret's troubles. When she wasn't crying or searching the apartment at 4 a.m. with a flashlight in hand, she was reading books about how to help get James to sleep. The boy, once a solid sleeper, now frequently came into his parents' room, afraid of being bitten. "He'd want to sleep with us, but I'm pretty strict about that," Margaret says, suddenly not smiling. "In hindsight I feel terrible. I was sending him back into the war zone, back into the room where he was being devoured. Even when we went to the country house, he was still having nightmares." The bites were unsightly and itchy, and Margaret began to worry for her family's health. Although bedbugs don't spread serious diseases, she didn't know that at the time.

Margaret decided she needed professionals to smite the insect army. She called an exterminator recommended by her building's management company, but the crew dispatched to her apartment ended up scalding the silk-velvet fabric of a gorgeous sofa the family had purchased for their new home. When Margaret called the president of the exterminating company to complain, the man rather rudely played the class card, she says, suggesting that it was probably "the fault of one of [her] cleaning ladies." "They simply didn't know what they were getting into," Margaret says. "I

heard them calling in to their bosses and saying that they'd had no idea how big this apartment would be and that they were going to be late for their next appointment."

The biting continued. Margaret learned that bedbugs tend to bite in threes—either in a line or, often, in a revolting triangle. In exterminator jargon, this pattern is known as "breakfast, lunch, and dinner." One night, the parasites supped on Margaret's husband straight across his forehead.

As night follows day, the family was going to have to move; a full-on assault was the only sure remedy. They began to prepare for a two-month stay at their weekend home. On moving day, no one went half-measures. Everything had to go. Margaret recalls a "special company wearing what looked like hazmat suits." The men removed everything that couldn't be dry-cleaned—rugs, books, luggage, paintings, shoes, toys, computers, even radios. Only simple, hard-surfaced items, like china and silverware (which even bedbugs can't burrow into), remained in the apartment. Margaret's family took just a limited amount of clothing—all of it, of course, meticulously steam-cleaned. For a time, her husband had to stay behind. "You need a human in the apartment to draw the bugs out," she says. "They're attracted by the carbon of someone exhaling."

Debugging an apartment, even thoroughly, only works if the neighbors' apartments are bug-free—otherwise the creatures can migrate and reinfest the place. The process can drive bugs into neighboring apartments, too. (To their credit, Margaret and her husband alerted everyone in the building to what was going on.) Margaret says she "felt a strange mixture of being exhausted, defeated, and paranoid that all of this wasn't going to work." The family had already spent about $30,000 on dry-cleaning alone and upward of $70,000 on the entire experience.

Bedbugs have been shimmying around in our sheets since ancient times. Aristotle mentioned them; Pliny the Elder thought they had medical value (they do not). Like any other force that stalks by night, *Cimex lectularius* are known by many names: the mahogany flat; the heavy dragoon; the crimson rambler; the *Nachtkrabbler*; and, most simply of all, the redcoat. They subsist on blood—human, but also (depending on where in the world they hunt) birds, cats, bats, and other small animals. They prefer to dine at night, sometimes dropping onto their victims from the ceiling, if need be, before having their five- or ten-minute "blood meal."

When the bedbugs come for you, they inject you with two tubes: one that supplies your skin with an anticoagulant and an anesthetic so that you don't react to what's going on, and another to draw the blood meal. Often the welts seen on victims—like those suffered by young James—are an allergic reaction to the anesthetic. Because a female can lay 500 eggs in a lifetime, it's axiomatic among exterminators that the definition of an infestation is a single pregnant female. A bedbug's life span varies according to feeding habits—they can stay dormant for eighteen months but prefer to eat every five or ten days. Given the right conditions, they can live up to two years. In the first of their six stages of life, bedbugs are almost transparent, which disgusts everyone who has ever found a newborn, but as they molt and engorge themselves, they become bloodreddish, which disgusts people even more. A household can easily be infested with tens of thousands at a time.

Bedbugs are fiendishly hearty. Dogs are helpful but by no means foolproof at sniffing them out. Chemicals that work against cockroaches are only partially effective. Standard-issue foggers just make things worse: Bedbugs love to nestle in fabric and wood (plush headboards, for instance, make an ideal home), and the mist will make them scatter. Given their reproduction rates, killing some of them is tantamount to killing none of them.

Predictably enough, the citywide bedbug phenomenon has spawned a wave of exterminator chicanery. Internet predators sell bogus remedies to desperate, discretion-minded souls. Any schnook with a mutt can train it to bark, then call his cousin Larry to "exterminate" the "bugs" that the dog "found." That scam is now widely regarded as a growth industry.

Following World War II and the advent of DDT, bedbugs were contained if not virtually eliminated. For a time, the pests were almost quaint. A generation of dermatologists could barely recognize the bites; they'd never been schooled in anything so antique. Exterminators, too, had rarely trained for such an eventuality. But DDT was eventually banned, and besides, the bugs had begun to adapt to it, and now bedbugs are back in force. Man plans; bedbugs laugh.

Jeff Eisenberg was the man who finally brought the hammer down on Margaret's problem. To her, he was wartime chocolate. Eisenberg, who owns a firm called Pest Away, does a lot of work on the Upper East Side. The neighborhood, he says, is teeming with bedbugs. Eisenberg knows that city statistics indicate otherwise. In 2004, there was one violation reported to the community board that covers the Upper East Side. One. In fiscal year 2009, there were thirteen. Those numbers are a joke, Eisenberg says. The uncomfortable truth, noted by Eisenberg and confirmed to me anonymously by a city Housing Department official, is that only renters call 311 to report bedbugs, mainly to create a paper trail they can use to pressure their landlords into fixing the problem. But if you own a brownstone or a co-op, or even if you're just reasonably well off, you tend to handle the problem yourself—and thus go uncounted by the city. "Believe me, most people on the Upper East Side don't call 311," Eisenberg says. "[Margaret] didn't. She called exterminators."

Pest Away, Eisenberg says, receives between 50 and 75 calls about bedbugs from the Upper East Side every week—and that's just one firm. His clients include movie directors, hospitals, white-shoe law firms, high-end schools, and "titans of Wall Street I can't name to you or they'd crush me."

Eisenberg likes to tell a story about a grand building on East 94th Street. Having received a complaint, he went to the relevant apartment, where he and the super knocked on the owner's door. The man was wearing a baseball cap, Eisenberg says, and a bedbug actually crossed the top of it. "I was thinking, 'What, am I on *Candid Camera*?' A minute later, another one crossed over the hat. I asked if I could look inside it—and they were crawling all over. I thought, 'There cannot just be bedbugs inside one cap.' We got into the apartment, and the walls were *moving*. Before we could treat it, we had to vacuum for two weeks, just to bring the population down."

Another Eisenberg tale involves "a very, very high-end building on East 92nd. Very well known. A super called me and said, 'We've got some bedbugs on a glue board.' But that didn't sound right to me. Bedbugs tend to avoid glue boards, so if that was the case, the whole building was probably infested. Lo and behold, the place was loaded. It turned out there was a guy living there who only left every five weeks to see a doctor. Once, he went downstairs to pay the rent and two bedbugs fell off his arm as he passed the envelope. Four staff members were standing right there and saw the whole thing, and two and a half minutes later, I get a call … That's one way they spread: hitchhiking. You get a hundred guys like that walking around the city like Pigpen—to a movie theater, wherever—and that's how it goes. I'd say that every third or fourth building up there has a guy like that."

In still another Upper East Side building, Eisenberg says, a woman with 400 or so first-edition books refused to admit that she had a bedbug problem. Her apartment turned out to be so infested that the walls, floors, and ceilings had to be removed to get rid of the 100,000 or so bugs that were living there (the building eventually sued her).

The Upper East Side bedbug plague has even made it to prime time. Just about anyone you meet in the uptown bedbug community knows about "the bedbug episode" of *30 Rock*. In it, Alec Baldwin's character, an Upper East Side resident if ever there was one, has an infestation and is eventually seen lumbering in a subway car, pouring out his soul to the hoi polloi by announcing,

“My name is Jack Donaghy, and I have bedbugs!” at which point a homeless man sitting nearby subtly inches away from him.

What makes the Upper East Side an enticing home? To a certain extent, it’s no more or less inviting than any other neighborhood. The whole city is in the midst of a bedbug epidemic; it’s just that Upper East Siders have kept their troubles disproportionately under wraps. Some of Eisenberg’s clients even experience a kind of personal denial. The first thing people tell him is that they can’t have bedbugs—that it’s got to be something else. “They tell me how clean they are, how many times a day they shower, how many cleaning ladies they have,” he says. (Margaret made a point of telling me that, if anything, she has always been “a little OCD” about cleanliness, and has her sheets cleaned and ironed three times a week.) “The stigma is, ‘You’re dirty, you’re poor. God knows where you’ve been.’ ” But bedbugs have nothing to do with dirt, Eisenberg says. “They only want the blood meal.” Sooner or later, the same clients who insisted they didn’t have a bedbug problem call Eisenberg back, asking for help. To cater to his clients’ privacy concerns, Eisenberg often operates incognito. “We go after-hours and pull up in unmarked vans. The guys put on leather jackets, to look like plumbers or regular guys, and sneak into the buildings. They change into their suits up in the apartment.” Because co-op boards and management companies often take pains to deny that their buildings have bedbug issues, the word *bedbugs* is now a regular feature in Upper East Side real-estate contracts.

Insisting that there’s not a problem—that bedbugs only happen to other people—may actually contribute to the problem. The longer you avoid the issue, the more the bugs proliferate. The number of large, multi-unit apartment buildings is another factor, Eisenberg says—it’s easy for the bugs to hop from one apartment to the next. He also says travel may make well-heeled families uniquely susceptible to infestation, as families jet around the globe and carry back bloodthirsty hitchhikers.

Catherine and her family live in the East Seventies (like Margaret, Catherine doesn’t want her real name used). Her family’s problem started about two years ago. “I noticed some marks on my arm,” she says. “Then we went to the Caribbean, and when we got there, I noticed bites on my baby’s face.” When the family got back home, Catherine noticed dark dots on her baby’s bed. Her pediatrician recognized the bites right away. “Do you want the real nitty-gritty disgustingness?” she asks, referring to her daughter’s bed. “The dark dots were the bugs going to the bathroom. It was excrement. You could also see drops of blood. When you move, the bugs think you’ll discover them—so they spit out the blood and run.”

Catherine says she has personally spoken (discreetly, of course) “to at least fifteen people up here who have this problem.” Most are understanding, she says, but “one friend stopped letting her kids come over here. And she didn’t want my child over there, either.” To a certain extent, Catherine is sympathetic. Bedbugs, she knows, freak people out. After discovering her own infestation, Catherine couldn’t sleep and imagined she was being bitten all the time: “A friend of mine was laughing about it because I was scratching all the time and jittery. I looked like a drug addict.”

Catherine approached her building’s exterminator, but after finding bugs only in her and her husband’s bedroom, he insisted there was no further problem. But eventually she found a bedbug in her daughter’s room, then rechecked her baby’s crib. “I moved it, and there were a bunch,” she adds. “That’s when I called in the big guns.”

Catherine speaks of Bliss Pest Protection Services as one might speak of a therapist who saved her life. As it happens, Steve Altarescu, the man who runs Bliss, has a master’s degree in counseling. He’s needed the full complement of his skills lately. “We’ve been doing this since 1882,” he says. “In five years, we’ve gone from hearing nothing about bedbugs to getting five or ten calls a day.”

Bliss uses bug-sniffing dogs to seek out where bedbugs may be lurking, and when the dogs got near Catherine's husband's snow clothes, they went mad. Shortly before the family had gone to the Caribbean, they had gone on a ski trip. The bugs had apparently traveled back with them from Aspen. Catherine called both of the hotels they had stayed at, but, no surprise, the establishments' representatives claimed they'd had no complaints. (In the world of bedbugs, everybody denies everything.) "I am not going to sue you," she assured them. "I'm not even going to follow up. But you'd better have those rooms checked."

Catherine and her husband don't take luggage anywhere near the bedroom when they return from a trip anymore. "We vacuum it," she says, "the moment we get back."

There is life after bedbugs. Margaret's world is now much restored. On a recent afternoon, James ran around after his bath, happily wrapped in a towel, entirely bite-free. He is beginning to forget. Early on, Margaret started the process of desensitizing James to the fear of bugs. "I had him watching animated movies like *Antz* and *A Bug's Life,*" she says. "Anything that treats bugs in a friendly way. Maybe we'll go to a farm and let him actually catch bugs." No one says the nighttime rhyme that starts with "Good night, sleep tight" to him anymore.

James's room is now pristine. Most of his toys and books were destroyed and replaced. "Everything here was sent for intensive cleaning," Margaret says. "This is the scene of the crime." His bed is still there—with new bedding, of course. "The old headboard," Margaret says sharply, "was sent out to be burned." Margaret still constantly checks pillowcases and James's skin. She also has an exterminator in every three months to lay powder into the apartment's cracks and crevices.

And what if none of that works? I ask her. What if she and her family faced another infestation? "If that happened again?" she asks. She takes less than two blinks to reply. "If that happened again, I would move."